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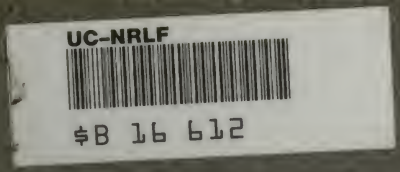

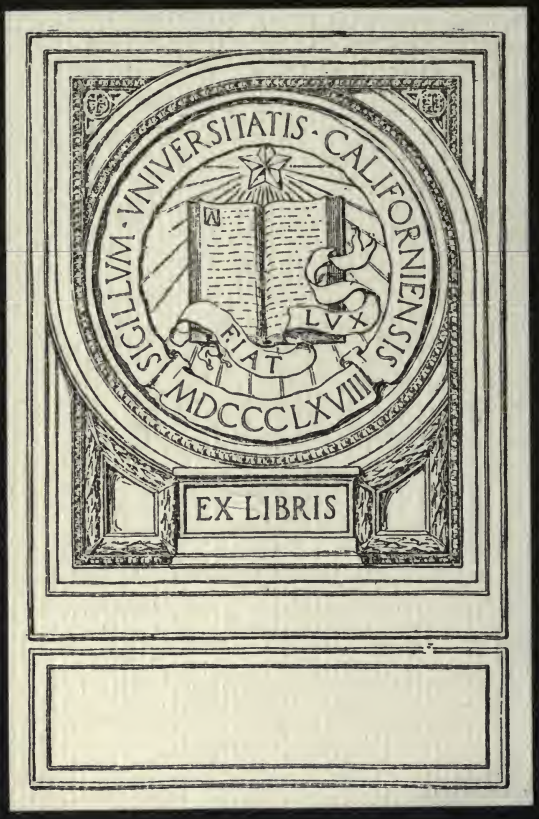
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BARNETT HOUSE PAPERS. No. 4

The Place of the University in National Life

BY

THE RIGHT HON. H. A. L. FISHER, D.Litt., M.P.,
PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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NOTE

THIS Address was delivered in the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford on February 22, 1919.

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THE PLACE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN NATIONAL LIFE

When I was asked to give one of the Barnett House Addresses my thoughts naturally turned to my old friend, Mr. Sidney Ball, to whose generous impulse of mind and character this Institution, like so many other fruitful movements in Oxford, in no small measure owes its origin. Ever since I knew Oxford, Mr. Ball swam on the crest of every sanguine adventure, and his rooms in St. John's constituted a centre for philosophic and economic discussion among men whose outlook on the world was not limited to the circle of academic interests but stretched out beyond to the eternal problems of want and poverty. It was in Mr. Ball's rooms, as we have recently been reminded by Mrs. Barnett's fascinating life of her husband, that Toynbee Hall was plotted in the year 1885, and no one could adequately write the history of the philanthropic activities of Oxford during the last generation who was not prepared to take account of Mr. Ball's genial inspiration and perennial enthusiasm for all good causes.

The subject of my Address this afternoon is one which occupied a large part of the mind of an Oxford leader older and more influential than Mr. Ball. No one who reads Abbott and Campbell's admirable life of Benjamin Jowett can fail to be impressed by the fact that the great Master of Balliol was constantly occupied with the problem of the place of Oxford in the scheme of National Education. Though he was a strong Balliol and Oxford man, his horizon was not bounded either by Balliol or by Oxford. He was always thinking of the manner in which the highest education obtainable in Oxford could be more effectively directed, more widely shared, and more influentially used for the benefit of the nation and the empire. Was not Oxford too small? Should the University, he asked in 1850, rest contented with educating 1,500 undergraduates, mainly the sons of clergymen and squires? Should it not provide enlarged opportunities for poor men, take a share in the training of Primary Teachers, exercise a guiding influence in the development of local Colleges and provincial Universities, so that they might be animated from the first by a liberal spirit rather than by the narrowing and arid atmosphere of a Mechanics Institute? Should

not Oxford play an effective part in the preparation of young men for life in India and in other quarters of the empire? Should it be contented with its old intellectual borders? Should it not rather push out along all the avenues of the vast kingdom of science? Such were many of the questions which occupied the Master's mind, and his large and active way of looking at University problems was not the least valuable part of his legacy to this place.

It is perhaps natural that the younger and less responsible members of the University, not being actually concerned with the conduct of University business, should have felt less interest in this side of the problem. As I try to think myself back into the Oxford atmosphere of the last two decades of the nineteenth century I feel that while our minds were occupied with many interests, from the Hegelian philosophy downwards, the system of Education provided or assisted at the expense of the State for the benefit of the general mass of the community was not among them. Some of us were prepared to spend part of our vacations in the East-end of London; and this general concern for the discharge of our social responsibilities was mingled with the intellectual, artistic, and athletic enthusiasms of the time—but we viewed Oxford, not unnaturally, as a place sharing with Cambridge the special function of completing the education of young men, coming from cultivated homes, trained for the most part in our Public Schools, and destined for political life or the learned professions. The newer Universities were of no account with us. The Municipal Secondary Schools had not come into being, and as for the education which was given in the Elementary Schools we knew and cared very little about it.

This narrowness of view was due not so much to aristocratic prejudice—for there were few places more open to democratic influence—as to the intense interest aroused by our own Oxford life and doings. We believed that a wide door was opened to aspiring merit through our Scholarships and through the Non-Collegiate system, and we knew, as a matter of fact, that the advantages of a University Education were enjoyed by a number of men who came from humble homes. We were further conscious that there was a good deal to be said for spreading the influence of the University teaching outside the walls, and the Oxford Extension Movement, then in its infancy, appeared likely to discharge this function adequately. We were proud of Oxford, of its high standards, its growing Schools of Research, of the abundant evidence of its spirit and animation, and of its increasing place in the affairs and affections of the nation.

The peculiar development of educational history in England and Wales was, though we were not conscious of the fact, the

shaping power which imposed upon our outlook upon the educational prospect those conditions of limitation and stimulus. With us, private enterprise has led the way. State organization has been subsequent and supplemental. Until the middle of the nineteenth century England was content with two Universities and those mainly fed from schools founded by private enterprise and maintained out of private endowments. The Universities manufactured gentlemen out of material specially prepared for the purpose. They had lost, or almost lost, the democratic character which belonged to them in the Middle Ages. They represented the land, the Church, and the professions; and had not succeeded in establishing contact with the new population which had grown up in the industrial centres of the North. It was rare for an Oxford or Cambridge man to go into business. There were no University Schools of Engineering, of Industrial Chemistry, of Agriculture, or of Metallurgy; and the strength of the established academic discipline was such that studies more directly germane to a good general education, such as Economics, Modern History, and Modern Literature, held a subordinate place in the curriculum. The country was divided into two educational worlds, each revolving in its own orbit, one ancient, strong, aristocratic, exercising a potent influence over the direction of the State; the other, modern, weak, democratic, an afterthought bred of the industrial revolution. In opposition to the practice of America, France, and Germany, the strong part of our educational fabric was built upon private enterprise; the weaker and more modern supplement was contributed by the action of the State.

I am not, therefore, raising a vain issue when I ask you to consider the place of the University in our National System of Education. Great changes have come over the educational world since I first came up to Oxford in 1884. The new Universities have developed and multiplied. Our system of public education has been transformed by the Acts of 1902 and 1918, and the State has now begun to exercise an influence over the direction of Scientific Research through the creation of a Department of the Privy Council which has been formed for the purpose of encouraging the application of science to the practical affairs of life. At the same time there has been a great increase in the extra-mural work of the Universities, both old and new. To their original functions of extending the bounds of knowledge and of educating undergraduate students, the Universities have now added the burden of providing education of a University character to adult men and women who have missed their opportunities in early life.

Here, then, we have the foundations of a new problem—a great increase in the number of Secondary Schools aided by the State

and furnishing at little or no cost an education to the sons and daughters of manual workers and small tradesmen, a great expansion in the numbers of the Teaching Profession in the State-provided and State-aided Schools, a growing hunger for University learning among the workers themselves, an enlargement of the vitality and influence of the newer Universities, and the State actively concerning itself with the promotion of Industrial and Scientific Research through a special organ created for the purpose and liberally supplied with funds. All these changes may be summed up by saying that the State has now become fully conscious of its responsibilities to learning and education, and of the place which institutions for the humane and scientific studies should properly hold in the national life.

The War has also brought into clear relief the fact, of which many of us have long been conscious, but which could not otherwise have secured a lodgment in the general consciousness of the community. All over the country, people have begun to realize that the Universities and Technical Colleges have stood for a great deal in the national equipment during these times of stress and strain. The Universities provided the officers for the Kitchener Armies, and furnished an indispensable body of scientific inquirers for the exploration of the numerous problems which arose out of the practice of the new art of war. To the medical services of the Army and Navy they contributed a large contingent, and no small part of the public work of the country and of the direction of public opinion through the Press was discharged by men who had received a liberal training in one of our Universities. I had recently occasion to examine the use which had been made of these centres of scientific inquiry by the three fighting departments of the Government. At the beginning of the War it would be no exaggeration to say that there was a most inadequate apprehension of the results which might be derived from the laboratories and brains of our Universities, but by degrees the Universities imposed themselves upon the State as indispensable instruments of public efficiency, and the largest drafts were made upon their resources of energy and goodwill. In the end, no less than thirty University laboratories were working at full pressure for one department of warfare alone.

The fact that the State has become conscious of the value of the University as an integral constituent of national power acquires more and more significance the longer we contemplate it, for the State, which crushed the Hindenburg line, is an engine possessing a range and a power of action far transcending the resources of the public authority ten years ago. And if the State, which after all is nothing but the organized public conscience of the community, is serious about education and research

and about the place which the Universities should take in the promotion of those two objects, then the Universities will be drawn into the movement, not so much by external force but by the suction of a current which runs through their own lives as well as through the general life of a nation.

From the point of view of the State, the Universities of the United Kingdom and of Ireland form a single body, furnishing a corps of workers upon whose researches, in the main, the advance of our higher knowledge must depend. They cannot all do everything: they should not all attempt to do the same things. In the sphere of Applied Science at least, where cost is highest and expansion most rapid, there should be some differentiation of functions among Universities if men and money are not to be squandered and if the nation is to derive the best advantage from its outlay. How much should be common to all, how much peculiar to each or to few, will be left to the joint forces of tradition, local circumstance, mutual agreement, and the discriminating agency of State grants. As research becomes more expensive, the need for some division of labour will become more obvious, and the share of State grants in bringing about that division will be increasingly prominent. In all this there is no new doctrine, only a clearer preception of a tendency already recognized. For some years past the Universities have been developing special lines of study, suggested by local or industrial conditions or by some accident of tradition or individual genius. Thus Liverpool has specialized in Tropical Medicine, Leeds in Textiles, Sheffield in Metallurgy, Cambridge and Reading in Agriculture, while Oxford remains *par excellence* our principal centre of Classical Studies. What, however, does now need some consideration is the extent to which those who are responsible for directing the policy in our Universities should act in unison and upon a comprehensive view of what is best for the country as a whole. I do not think that we can be altogether content to leave events to the blind play of competition, and I should be sorry if the deciding factor should rest with the Government. It would be altogether more wholesome and more in accordance with the tradition of English academic life if the policy of University development over the whole country were to be shaped in the interests of the whole country and upon a view of national needs by the Universities themselves.

For this, among other reasons, I welcome every sign of co-operation between the Universities, old and new, and think it to be of good augury that on two occasions in the past year representatives of the Universities of Great Britain and Ireland should have met together for the transaction of common business in London and that the Principals and Vice-Chancellors

of the Universities should have been formed into a standing committee to represent the joint University interest in the country. If, however, the co-operation of the Universities is to be really fruitful, it must not be confined to the rare occasions upon which joint action may be compelled by some international exigency or great departure in academic policy. It should be a continuous principle of academic management. Let it be asked, for instance, whether there are not too many Classical Scholarships offered in the University of Oxford. Clearly it is not an unimportant question, seeing that the provision of Scholarships to the University in a given subject largely determines the direction which shall be imparted to the minds of the boys and girls in Secondary Schools from which the University is recruited, and that the studies of the Secondary Schools in turn react upon the curriculum of the Preparatory Schools below them. On the contrary, there can be no matter in the correct solution of which the nation has a more direct interest than the balance of subjects represented by the Prizes and Scholarships of our Universities and, in particular, of our two pre-eminent Universities. But this problem will be settled not by the University, after consultation with other Universities, nor by the University at all, but by the separate action of the Colleges upon a view of their separate needs, aptitudes, and inclinations. Yet clearly the first question to be decided is whether upon a comprehensive view of the provision of University Scholarships in the Universities of Great Britain and Ireland there is a case for a reduction in the number of Classical rewards offered by a University which specializes in the study of Classical Antiquity. The problem cannot be justly solved without considering the general balance of encouragement given to modern and ancient subjects throughout the country. But will it be so considered? Here the agency is of less importance than the spirit in which the subject is attacked.

The new educational legislation will, by its enlargement of the area of State-aided Education, affect the Universities in three ways. Presumably it will fit a greatly increased number of young men and women for a University life, and so increase the number of candidates for the Bachelor Degree; and certainly it will create a greatly increased demand for teachers in the State-aided Schools, all of whom will, it is to be hoped, at some time or another come within the influence of the Universities. Lastly, it will create a new clientèle for extra-mural University teaching. At present the appeal of the Extension Movement and the Workers' Educational Association is severely limited by the fact that, for the vast majority of the population, education ceases with the Elementary School. The lamp of learning, so

painfully and expensively lit, is allowed to flicker out under the strong invading force of industrial occupations, and it is only the fit and the few who are willing at a later stage in life to submit themselves to any regular form of intellectual discipline. All this will be greatly changed by the development of cheap Secondary Schools and by the introduction under the Act of 1918 of a system of part-time Day Continuation Classes. The effect will not be immediately visible; but thirty years hence it will be found to have been profound and all-pervasive, for it will have stamped the University on the consciousness of the people as a democratic institution open to all and spreading its influence over the whole surface of national life.

That the Universities should train as many of our teachers as possible is an object of the greatest importance, if the Teaching Profession, even in its humblest branches, is to be regarded not as a Trades Union but as a liberal calling. There are, however, two clear limitations which we cannot afford to lose sight of. A University is one thing, a Training College is another, and no University can train too many teachers without losing its proper character as a centre of learning and general inquiry. There is, therefore, some proportion to be observed between the efforts which a University should put out in this sphere of training and in the other spheres which belong to it. And the second condition is no less important. The University is weakened, rather than strengthened, if it admits students who by their acquisitions and abilities are incapable of profiting by the Degree Courses. The supply of ability fitted to undertake the higher teaching is, in any case, painfully limited, and sad inroads have been made upon it by the ravages of war. There can be no more wasteful process than to use up brains which should be employed upon scientific discovery or literary research or upon the more lofty ranges of teaching, in the performance of educational tasks which are below the University level. It would be an ill service, both to teachers and taught, to swamp the University lecture rooms with young men and women who could only be profitably instructed by lecturers who were prepared to debase the intellectual currency. Whatever changes may come over the Universities in the future, the last change which any friend of Education would desire would be a lowering of standard or a diminution in the amount of leisure available for original research. Subject, however, to those two conditions, it is unquestionably to the national interest that the Universities should play their part in the training of men and women who propose to enter the State service of Education: and, as time goes on, this function will be found to be of increasing importance.

Especially is it to be desired that University men and women

should take up work in the new Continuation Schools which will be set up upon the conclusion of peace. Here is a new field of endeavour, half educational, half social, of enormous promise but likely to be confronted by great initial difficulties and by reluctances only to be overcome if the new schools are staffed with men and women of the right stamp. In a new departure of this kind, very much depends upon a first-rate standard being set from the very first in a few leading schools in differently constituted industrial areas. A dozen first-rate Continuation Schools in Lancashire might convert the cotton trade; a little knot of discerning men and women, who knew what was possible and what impossible in our rural districts, might bring the agricultural interest to look upon these developments with less disfavour. Indeed, the most encouraging feature of educational life in this country is the great influence which the insight and resolution of a single man or a single woman may exert upon a wide neighbourhood. Over and over again we find that if one county has forged ahead in Education and another county has fallen behind, the fact is to be traced to an individual Director or Chairman or Member of an Education Committee.

This reflection leads me to observe that there is another territory which might be occupied by men trained in the liberal discipline of our Universities, with ample profit both to themselves and to the community. For many years past, Civil Servants of England and of India have been recruited from our Universities and mainly from Oxford and Cambridge, and there is no abler, purer, or more industrious public service in the world. We know all about the Home Civil Service and the Indian Civil Service. More than once they have been made the object of public inquiry, and it is common knowledge that a high standard of intellectual ability and acquisition is demanded as a condition of entrance from all who aspire to serve the State, whether at home or in India, as permanent members of the civil administration. But there is another Civil Service in this country concerning which we know much less and of which the Universities have hardly become conscious, though it is steadily increasing its influence and importance among the people. The County and Municipal Civil Service constitutes a great body of functionaries. On its educational side alone it must number well over 1,000 members (though it is significant that the Board of Education has no figures with respect to this large personnel), maintained in an administrative service which costs more than a million and a half a year. There has never been a Royal Commission to inquire into the recruitment, qualifications, or material conditions of this important service, though the working of the educational machinery in this country is

very largely in its hands. Some of these officials are highly educated men, others are not. Some have zeal, ideas, energy; others are content with the modest rôle which may be discharged by any industrious and active clerk. It is not my submission that it should be made a condition of entrance to the higher branches of the local service of Education that a man should have won a University Degree, but I do contend that there is urgent need that the spirit of a liberal education should be infused into this important branch of the public service, an object which may perhaps be more readily attained when it is realized that University men who elect to adopt a career under a Local Educational Authority may, if they have the necessary qualities, find themselves armed with a degree of power for furthering the educational progress of the country which far transcends that attaching to the head mastership of a great Public School.

Whether a large increase in the number of University graduates, exercising an influence on the educational system of the country, will be a benefit to the State, depends upon the way in which the Universities conceive and discharge their function. If the main energies of teachers and taught are concentrated upon examinations and these examinations are framed in a narrow and specializing spirit, if teaching is dogmatic and learning parrotlike, if it is possible for students to pass through a University without having been brought to the point of view from which learning is regarded in Von Humboldt's words as something 'not yet revealed and never quite revealed', if specialization is carried so far that neither Art nor Philosophy, the two all-pervading influences in any truly liberal education, enter into the ordinary work of the ordinary student, then very little will be gained by the enlargement or multiplication of our Universities. Whether their main business be literary or scientific they will have failed if they cannot do more than this, to give to the country what it should ask and receive from an institution claiming to rank as a University. The mere aggregation under a single constitutional umbrella of a Training College for Teachers, a Medical School, and a Technical Institute does not ensure the presence of those qualities which we associate with the University tradition. To enable a teacher, a doctor, or an engineer to obtain a minimum professional qualification is a useful function which may well be discharged in a University, but it is not in itself a University function. The business of a University is not to equip students for professional posts, but to train them in disinterested intellectual habits, to give them a vision of what real learning is, to refine taste, to form judgment, to enlarge curiosity, and to substitute for a low and material outlook on life a lofty view of its resources and demands.

The discipline in the Humanities is so firmly rooted and the atmosphere of classical antiquity so generally diffused in Oxford that the Pure and Applied Sciences, being comparatively late-comers, are somewhat overshadowed by the older Muses. In the newer Universities this state of things is reversed. There the great impulse to academic development proceeds from the practical needs of a business community, fast becoming aware of the commercial and industrial value of Science. The Technical School, which originally was founded to train workmen and foremen for the local industries, was found to need such a background of Chemistry and Physics as it was thought that only a University could supply, and to this development a Faculty of Art, mainly devoted to the training of young women for service in the Elementary Schools, together with Faculties providing qualifications for local doctors and lawyers, were in due course appended. Growing from such a nucleus the Civic University in our great industrial centres is slowly but certainly arousing a hunger for the better things which an intellectual life can offer in a society always active, vigorous, and masculine, but too exclusively engrossed by the material struggle for existence. The obstacles are great, for whereas in Scotland the University habit has been continuously present for several centuries, in the populous and energetic part of England it is a recent innovation, ignored in some quarters, in others still looked upon as an idle and profligate luxury oppressive to the rates. By degrees, however, the climate is becoming more propitious to that side of academic activity which is least obviously connected with industry and trade. The North is ready to welcome the Humanities and there are no more eager audiences, though there may be many better qualified to criticize, than those which confront the really capable teacher of literature, philosophy, or history in one of our great centres of industry.

The professor upon the staff of one of our new Universities is not entitled to regard himself as appointed solely to minister to the needs of a classroom of raw students. The delivery of the Degree Courses is only part of his work. He is one of a body of missionaries whose object it is to speak to the city and its environment. An energetic professor of any department of Medical Science may succeed in raising the scientific standard of his professional colleagues who are engaged in the active practice of the art, and many a factory which has previously been content with a dull and slovenly routine has acquired a new life and energy through its contact with the scientific work of a local University. It should not, however, be imagined that the utility of these institutions is circumscribed by the boundaries, wide as those may be, of Physical Science. We have now reached a stage in

the development of our Civic Universities in which, as it seems to me, more stress might rightly be laid upon the teaching of the Humanities and upon a diffusion of that particular type of intellectual habit which familiar conversation with the great minds of the past is apt to engender. The Sciences are now safe enough. They require more money; they require more recruits; they are susceptible of almost infinite developments; but there is very little danger that the needs of this side of intellectual activity will be neglected in our Civic Universities. What does need emphasis is the value for a manufacturing community of an intellectual influence which, if it should be as widely diffused as one might desire, is capable in a thousand and one ways of altering for the better the general tone and temper of industrial life, both on the side of capital and on the side of labour. The workers are now beginning to look to the Universities and are half inclined to trust them. They have begun to regard them as institutions which exist for the benefit of the general public and which represent a disinterested outlook on life, and if the Universities succeed in maintaining their reputation for strict impartiality in the political and industrial quarrels of the age, while at the same time they exercise a humanizing influence upon the general mass of the population through the Secondary Schools, through the Workers' Educational Association, through Extension Lectures, and through the association of their leading members with all the best philanthropic and intellectual enterprises of the neighbourhood, it is reasonable to hope that some of the most intractable difficulties which now appear to confront us will be toned down and eventually disappear. Is there something inappropriate in these references to the newer Universities, in the course of a homily delivered to an Oxford audience? Has Oxford no part or lot in the gallant battles, waged in less fortunate regions, against the eternal powers of dullness and ignorance? Let it be remembered that for the greater part of their teaching staff these less favoured institutions forage along the banks of the Isis and the Cam, and that as the spirit moves upon the parent waters so it is reflected on the surface of many tributary streams. The newer Universities cannot affect indifference to the practice and purpose of Oxford and Cambridge, and the obligations, which in former times were one-sided, are beginning to be reciprocal. In this interchange and intercommunion there are seeds of rich promise for the moral and intellectual development of the nation.

H. A. L. FISHER.

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